New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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1951 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1950 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Affairs of State	267
Arms and the Man	235
Bell, Book and Candle	206
Black Chiffon	261
Bless You All	170
*Call Me Madam	243
Captain Brassbound's Conversion	157
Cocktail Party (The)	376
Country Girl (The)	210
Enemy of the People (An)	154
*Guys and Dolls	185
Happy Time (The)	370
King Lear	160
Lady's Not for Burning (The)	213
Member of the Wedding (The)	397
Out of This World	166
Pardon Our French	254
Peep Show	285
Peter Pan	306
Ring Round the Moon	189
Season in the Sun	258
Twentieth Century	163

•

1949 Vol.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes	198
*South Pacific	312

•

1948 Vol.

Kiss Me, Kate	91
Mister Roberts	338
Where's Charley?	197

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 10, 1951

1951 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1951

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*	*Stage Play*	*Page*
Angel in the Pawnshop	380	Long Days (The)	288
Angels Kiss Me	297	Make a Wish	294
Autumn Garden (The)	325	Mary Rose	328
Billy Budd	353	Mikado (The)	370
Courtin' Time	254	*Moon Is Blue (The)	322
Cox and Box	341	Night Music	300
Darkness at Noon	388	Not for Children	348
Dream Girl	271	*Oklahoma!	257
L'Ecole des Femmes	307	Peer Gynt	373
Flahooley	264	Pirates of Penzance (The)	341
Four Twelves Are 48	384	Razzle Dazzle	339
Getting Married	268	Romeo and Juliet	318
Gondoliers (The)	351	*Rose Tattoo (The)	363
Gramercy Ghost	281	Royal Family (The)	392
Green Bay Tree (The)	368	School for Wives (The)	307
Green Pastures (The)	312	Second Threshold	398
H.M.S. Pinafore	361	*Seventeen	250
High Ground (The)	336	Small Hours (The)	344
House of Bernarda Alba (The)	395	Springtime Folly	331
Idiot's Delight	260	Springtime for Henry	315
Iolanthe	347	*Stalag 17	274
*King and I (The)	304	Taming of the Shrew (The)	284
King of Friday's Men (The)	334	Ti-Coq	358
King Richard II	376	*Tree Grows in Brooklyn (A)	291
*Lace on Her Petticoat	242	Trial by Jury	361
Little Blue Light (The)	278	*Two on the Aisle	246

CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD 302

Theatre Openings

"Lace on Her Petticoat"

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 10, 1951

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK MIRROR

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"Lace on Her Petticoat"

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

September 5, 1951

Scotland of the 90s Backdrops 'Petticoat'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Lace on Her Petticoat" opens the new season as a conversational little piece that ought to be a good deal more charming and touching than it is.

Scotland of the Nineties is the setting of the comedy drama. It sounds deceptively simple, probably because its ideas are imparted through talk, more often than action.

A young widowed milliner is dubious about her child's friendship for the daughter of a nobleman. The milliner's mother disapproves of her romance with a dock worker, who wants her to bring her family to Canada with him.

Wealth of Talk.

These relations are painstakingly developed through two acts, with an overwhelming wealth of talk. In the third act the author has crammed all her action for a tear-wringing, breath-taking finale. The children's relationship turns out to be forbidden by the peeress' mother, with nearly disastrous results. In the youngsters' separation, the older lovers are joined. The prospect is a brighter one in Canada, where presumably everyone is equal.

One trouble with this production is that most of the direction has been lavished on the final scene, in which the movement, timing and mood are practically perfect.

What happens, then, though, makes no difference to anybody, since the personal relationships have failed to previously convince you of their authenticity. If they had, the third act would be infallible.

'A' For Effort.

Motionless conversation, of the caliber that most of us can have at home for nothing, does not achieve theatrical honesty. There is neither depth nor much wit about the talk. Consequently, one expects the performers to present it with charm and invention of their own. They frequently try, but rarely do.

Neva Patterson as the milliner struck me as being the only member of the cast who suggested any life of her character beyond the confines of the set. Patsy Bruder and Perlita Neilson play the two little girls, one who has always wanted lace on her petticoat, and the other who has always had it.

They are valiant, reading "Pilgrim's Progress aloud, discussing the origin of babies and repeatedly greeting each other with hysterical ecstasy. These are roles which would have tried Shirley Temple and Margaret O'Brien if they had been contemporaries, and these young ladies are not here up to that standard.

"LACE ON HER PETTICOAT"

Play by Aimee Stuart; staged by Herman Shumlin; scenery by Samuel Leve; costumes by Hazel Roy; presented by Mr. Shumlin at the Booth Theatre, September 4, 1951. The cast:

Mrs. Cahoon.....Jean Cameron
Mrs. Oliphant.....Muriel Aked
Elspeth McNairn..Patsy Bruder
Alexandra Carmichael.....
Perlita Neilson
Faith McNairn..Neva Patterson
Hamish Cahoon....Jeff Morrow
Mac.....Jock MacGregor

DAILY NEWS

September 5, 1951

1st Play, 'Lace on Her Petticoat,' A Nice, Rather Treacly Treatise

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The season's first play, presented by Herman Shumlin at the Booth Theatre last evening, is "Lace on Her Petticoat," a Scottish comedy by Aimee Stuart. It is nicely played by a nice company which talks mostly in Highland dialect, and is by no means a discredit to the stage. Some of it, in fact, is quite affecting; but a great deal of it—and it is a long play—is unremittingly sentimental. There may be sentimentalists enough among our playgoers to support it, but this I doubt. We like some Scottish liquids, but treacle does not seem to be in vogue.

Mrs. Stuart's play is a fable about a Princess and a Cinderella who grew to love each other very much, to the unhappiness of both. The class distinctions of Scotland in the year 1890 are too undemocratic for people to go about loving above or below their stations with the hope of getting any pleasure from their affections.

The principals of "Lace on Her Petticoat" are two early teen-age actresses, Patsy Bruder and Perlita Neilson, who sustain their girlish transports remarkably well. Miss Bruder is the Cinderella—a lass spending her time in the care of a crusty grandmother in a modest rented cottage on the sea coast while her widowed mother runs a millinery shop in Edinburgh and comes for weekend visits.

Varied Snobbery.

Miss Neilson, the Princess, is the daughter of a marquis — a lovely lass who resides in the castle on the hill. They develop a most frightful girlish crush on each other, even though their elders on both sides of the castle wall believe no good will come of it. Nor does good come; their sweet and innocent companionship is broken by the caste system.

This caste system of Mrs. Stuart's and Mr. Shumlin's is not merely a division marked by the castle wall. There is snobbery in Cinderella's own cottage, where her grandmother won't let her play with a neighbor girl with dirty hair, and where Grandma even disapproves of her own daughter, the milliner, consorting with a brawny shipyard worker who drinks his tea with the spoon in the cup.

Well, as I say, it's all very nice. The two girls sustain their roles affectingly and precociously. Neva Patterson is handsome and spirited as the milliner, and Muriel Aked, a newcomer to these shores who plays the grandmother, is another of those excellent character comediennes who flourish on the London stage. Jeff Morrow is properly forthright as the shipyard man, and there are smaller roles entrusted to Jock McGregor and Jean Cameron.

Mrs. Stuart has another play due on Broadway this season titled "A Case of Scotch." There might be more of a bang in it.

New York Post

September 5, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Long Evening on a Scottish Isle

The new drama season's first offering is a gentle and tearful little Scottish drama that took a remarkably long time to pass a given point at the Booth Theater last night. It is called "Lace on Her Petticoat." It is the work of Aimee Stuart, and it had a prosperous run in hospitable London recently. I fear, however, that it is not likely to duplicate its English success here, because, while it has some charming and touching scenes and good performances, it seems, on the whole, tedious and plodding and occasionally rather mawkish.

The people of England and Scotland are known for their reticence, their ability to control their emotions, and their admiration for the code of the stiff upperlip, but somehow, they have a frequent way of losing that celebrated restraint in the theater. When their drama goes in for sentiment, it can let out all the stops and indulge in a lachrymose spree that relishes every tearurop. This is what happens in "Lace on Her Petticoat." It takes quite a while to get to the tears, but, when it does, there is no stopping it.

Two Children

In her play, the author is telling the story of two little girls, on an island off the west coast of Scotland in 1890, who take a great fancy to one another. One is the daughter of a young widow who owns a shop in Glasgow and the other is the child of the local peer, and, even though the children have developed a genuine mutual fondness, the mother and grandmother of the poor girl are sure that nothing good will come of it. For a time it seems that their suspicions are unjustified, but, finally, I am sorry to tell you, class lines are drawn, and the hearts of the two little girls are broken.

Although everything in "Lace on Her Petticoat" is too long, some of the scenes between the two children are both charming and touching. Perhaps, despite its tendency to incline toward the maudlin, the play might have proved rather effective if it had been satisfied to confine itself to the tragic story of the doomed friendship. But the author also takes up the matter of a romance between the poor girl's mother and a rebellious young worker, with the added point that the lower classes, too, can be cruelly snobbish.

Class Arrogance

The point, I am sure, is well taken, and there is a certain effectiveness in the drawing of a parallel between the class arrogance of the peerage, that can wreck the friendship of two little girls, and an ironically similar lack of humanity between different segments of the poor, which can also result in tragedy. But the second plot is superimposed on the first story so ineffectively that, instead of adding strength, it simply makes one narrative get in the way of the other. One result is that neither story seems properly effective.

The two children are engagingly played by Perlita Nielson, as the child of the peerage, and Patsy Bruder, as the daughter of the people. Young Miss Nielson in particular, a grave and charming child, with a fascinating suggestion of Tenniel's Alice about her, gives a delightful performance. Neva Patterson, as the mother, again demonstrates that she is one of the best of the younger actresses, and there are helpful portrayals by Jeff Morrow and Muriel Aked. But, in the end, "Lace on Her Petticoat" proves more tedious than charming.

Journal American

September 5, 1951

Importation Doesn't Look Too Durable

By ROBERT GARLAND

If not too much else, the opener of the 1951-1952 theatrical season is as clean as a whistle. There's nothing, absolutely nothing, dirty in "Lace on Her Petticoat." Aimee Stuart is the author and her play is as immaculate as a brand new paper napkin. And almost as durable.

Coming direct from the tiny Ambassadors Theatre in London to the bigger Booth here in New York, there's an almost six months' run behind it. Two members of the English cast remain: Muriel Aked, a grown-up actress and Perlita Neilson, a not grown-up follower.

The others are all God-bless-Americans. Preferable, I think, is Jeff Morrow, who was in "Billy Budd" last season. Mr. Morrow is again admirable under a truly trying circumstance. He's continuously being put out of Mrs. Oliphant's cottage onto the west coast of Scotland.

The scenery, 1890 and cycloramic, is from Samuel Leve. The costumes, Victorian and picturesque, are from Hazel Roy. The direction is by Herman Shumlin, who is also the importer.

* * *

Two Plots

There's a pair of plots. One's about Alexandra, who has lace on her petticoat, and Elspeth, who hasn't. Not at the beginning. Sixty years ago, the west coast of Scotland was overly class conscious. And lace on your petticoat was a goodly part of a venerated title.

Then there's Elspeth's mother. She's a widow and a milliner. And the human yen in Hamish Cahoon's eye. But whenever he comes to woo her, he's put out of Mrs. Oliphant's cottage. Mrs. Oliphant's cottage is where, on the west coast of Scotland, Hamish's beloved stays.

In the last of the acts you're shown why the hero, as it were, is put out time and time again. It's plot! For when Alexandra isn't allowed to play with Elspeth and Elspeth isn't allowed to go to Alexandra's party, Elspeth throws herself over Mrs. Oliphant's much talked about seawall.

Hamish Cahoon not only saves Elspeth McNairn, but he saves Elspeth McNairn's mother for himself. He and Faith, and Mrs. Oliphant and Elspeth, will soon be bound for Canada.

* * *

Magpie Chatter

Not knowing how regal Alexandra Carmichael was sixty-one years ago, I admit that Perlita Neilson is regal at the Booth. Especially when she crosses the stage and shakes hands. Elspeth, her playmate, in the person of Patsy Bruder, is more democratic. She merely skips.

Together, chatting, the girls —and how they love one another!—nearly drive me crazy. They talk and love and talk. And shrilly, like agitated magpies. For the most part, I can't understand them. But even when I can, I wish I couldn't. Their talk is not affording.

Elspeth's mother, Faith, is more understandable and less talkative than her daughter or her daughter's friend. Neva Patterson, who plays her, is not bad looking. And she doesn't skip as does Elspeth, or non-skip as does Alexandra. Jock MacGregor is a coachman without a coach.

"Lace on Her Petticoat" is, as I have said, clean as a whistle and, thanks to Perlita Neilson and Patsy Bruder, just about as shrill. As Alexandra and Elspeth, they drive all tasty comment from my mind.